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# Safe Food in a Hurry

## EMPLOYED HOMEMAKER



Texas Agricultural Extension Service  
The Texas A&M University System  
Daniel C. Pfannstiel, Director · College Station, Texas

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## Safe Food in a Hurry

Mary K. Sweeten\*

Foodborne illness can lead to time away from the job for the employed homemaker besides causing family misery. You have to work to prevent food poisoning as you buy, store, cook and serve food. When you must care for food in a hurry, keep the food safe by following these simple rules: Keep food hot. Keep food cold. Keep food clean.

### Keep Food Hot

Most germs that cause food poisoning are killed when you boil, broil or roast foods. However, when food stays warm (less than 140 degrees F.) for 2 hours or longer, some germs can produce poisons that are not destroyed by heating. Once food is cooked, keep it hot until served and refrigerate leftovers at once. Leaving food at room temperature for more than 2 hours (including preparation time) may allow food poisoning germs to multiply to large numbers. These germs seldom change the taste, color or looks of food.

Some foods require special precautions. For example, know what kind of ham you have bought. Some need to be cooked; others are fully cooked and can be eaten as they come from the package. Check the label and if you have any doubts, cook it.

Cook poultry products thoroughly. If you prepare turkey, chicken or duck ahead of the day for cooking, store in the refrigerator. Store giblets and stuffing separately. Do not stuff the bird a day or two ahead of the cooking; stuff the bird just before roasting. Refrigerate leftover, deboned poultry and stuffing as soon as possible in separate dishes. This hastens the cooling time.

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\*Extension foods and nutrition specialist, The Texas A&M University System.

## Keep Food Cold

GermS cannot multiply very fast if the storage temperature is 40 degrees F. or below. Store meat, poultry, eggs, milk and cheese in the refrigerator. At the supermarket, always pick up meat, poultry and dairy products last; take them home and put them in the refrigerator or freezer quickly. If these products get warm, the possibility of food poisoning and spoilage increases.

When you bring meat home from the grocery store, remove the butcher wrappings and cover loosely with waxed paper. Leave cured and smoked meats such as bacon in the original wrap until opened; then rewrap tightly in foil or plastic.

The refrigerator life of meat varies from 1 to 7 days. The most perishable meats are ground beef, veal, lamb, ground pork and variety meats which will only keep 1 to 2 days in the refrigerator. Fresh beef, veal, pork, lamb and leftover cooked meat will keep 2 to 4 days in the refrigerator. Smoked sausage, bacon, a smoked whole ham and corned beef will keep 7 days in the refrigerator. Protect your investment in meat by using it before it loses its quality.

When you are in a hurry, the best way to thaw meat and poultry is to leave it in the refrigerator overnight or during the day while you are at work. An alternate method is to thaw it outside the refrigerator in a sealed plastic bag under cold running water, in a closed double paper bag without using water or in the microwave oven. The trick is to allow the product to get just warm enough to thaw and still cool enough to slow down germ growth, particularly on the meat surface. A good time saver for the employed homemaker is to cook meats while still frozen.

Luncheon meat and weiners should be stored in the refrigerator. Do not treat them as though they cannot have food poisoning germs—they can. Even stored in the refrigerator, hot dogs and lunch meat should be used within a week. Open and close packages as few times as possible. Handle cold meats (or any meats) with a fork or tongs, not your fingers. Fingers spread germs.

If you take your lunch to work, try preparing, packaging and freezing sandwiches ahead. Then making your lunch will be not only a quick process, but a safe one too. By lunchtime your sandwich will be thawed, yet cold enough to prevent bacteria from growing.

## Keep Food Clean

Do not buy or use food from containers with these faults: leaking, bulging, or damaged cans; cracked jars or jars with loose or bulging lids. Do not taste or use food

that has a foul odor or any food from a can which spurts liquid when you open it. These foods could contain the rare but fatal (12 percent of the time) botulism poison. Botulism is found more often in home-canned foods than in commercial products, but be careful either way.

If you keep germs off meat, poultry and dairy products, you avoid problems. Clean utensils, platters, hands and countertops with soap and hot water. Germs are a natural part of the environment—you have to keep washing them off things, especially off your hands. Do not handle food if you have infected cuts and sores. Even if you are in a hurry, always cover any sore carefully before handling food.

Be careful not to spread germs from raw meat to cooked meat. If you carry raw hamburgers to the grill on a platter, you should wash the platter before serving the cooked hamburgers. Otherwise there will be germs on your cooked hamburgers.

Never prepare food to be eaten raw on the same chopping board as cooked food. After cutting raw chicken, wash the chopping board with 1 part bleach to 1 gallon water or a good detergent and water. This prevents transferring bacteria from one food to another.

Keeping pets out of the kitchen is another preventive measure. Also, teach children to wash their hands after playing with pets.

Remember three key rules to keep food safe even when you are in a hurry: Keep food hot. Keep food cold. Keep food clean. Under most circumstances, these rules and good common sense will protect you and your family from food poisoning.

If you do get sick, see a doctor. Think about how you stored, cooked and served food in the last few days.



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